

# A critique of Paulo Freire's perspective on human nature to inform the construction of theoretical underpinnings for research

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## Abstract

This article presents a critique of Paulo Freire's philosophical perspective on human nature in the context of a doctoral research study to explore "muchness" or nurses' subjective experience of well-being; and demonstrates how this critique has informed the refinement of the theoretical principles used to inform research methodology and methods. Engaging in philosophical groundwork is essential for research coherence and integrity. Through this groundwork, largely informed by Freire's critical pedagogy and his ideas on humanization, I recognized the need to clarify my understanding of the concepts of persons and personhood and how this related to Freire's use of the term human beings. This clarification process is essential to ensure congruence between the theoretical principles that I draw from his work and my beliefs about persons, personhood and person-centredness. The article begins with a brief introduction to the research, followed by an overview of Freire's philosophical perspectives, and subsequently, the critique process is presented and discussed. This process involved engaging with the vast literature and debates about what it means to be a person, to make sense of the often complex and contradictory arguments. Eventually, three headings emerged that helped me to frame my evolving understanding: *Our species: human beings*; *The kind that we are: human nature*; and *This person that I am: personhood*. Through this process of exploration, I recognized that Freire's perspective on human nature (a) foregrounded cognitive rationality, which presented itself as a limitation when considering my ontological beliefs and the focus of my research, leading me to draw on the work of Mark Johnson and his ideas about embodiment to help me to further develop my theoretical principles; (b) focused on the "collective" rather than individuals, which is a shortcoming in relation to person-centred research that acknowledges the uniqueness of participants.

## KEYWORDS

embodiment, Freire, human beings, human nature, ontology, person

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article presents a critique of Paulo Freire's philosophical perspective on human nature in the context of a doctoral research study to explore "muchness" or nurses' subjective experience of well-being. I was initially drawn to Freire's idea of conscientization, a process through which people (individually and collectively) are empowered by constructing and using their own knowledge of reality, thereby identifying how it can be transformed (Reason & Torbert, 2001; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). However, as I immersed myself further in Freire's critical and liberatory pedagogy and his ideas on humanization (Freire, 2000), I recognized the need to explore the relationship between Freire's use of the term "human being" and my understanding of what is a "person." This is important because on a personal level and as an affiliate member of a centre for person-centred research practice, I believe that my research should be underpinned by the values and principles of person-centredness. I therefore needed to clarify my understanding of the concepts of persons and personhood and how this relates to Freire's use of the term human beings, to ensure that there is a congruence between the theoretical principles that I have drawn from his work to underpin my research and my beliefs about persons, personhood and person-centredness. I contend that developing robust theoretical principles through philosophical groundwork is fundamental to achieving research coherence and integrity as they will inform my methodologies and methods (Trigg, 2001).

The critique process involved engaging with the vast literature and debates about what it means to be a person: reading, rereading and writing to make sense of the often complex and contradictory arguments. Eventually, three headings emerged that helped me to frame my evolving understanding: *Our species: human beings*; *The kind that we are: human nature*; and *This person that I am: personhood*.

The article will firstly provide a brief introduction to my research, followed by an overview of Freire's philosophical perspectives, before I explore the three headings identified above. I will demonstrate how my understanding has evolved by sharing how my theoretical principles were developed and refined over time.

## 2 | ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Although change in health care is not new, the current economic and social climate means that services are under constant pressure to provide high-quality care to populations with increasingly complex needs, whilst also experiencing a squeeze on public funding. The impact on the day-to-day life of staff is not always a positive one (Point of Care Foundation, 2014). I frequently experience this first hand, when working with nurse-led teams in my role as a practice development facilitator. Staff talk about feeling overworked, undervalued and undermined. This appears to impact on their readiness and desire to develop themselves, their practice and workplace cultures that are person-centred.

My interest in the concept of "muchness" arises from these experiences and was initially stimulated when I read "Alice in Workland" by Walsh and Craig (2014). This blog considered some quotes from Alice in Wonderland, to identify what lessons or meaning they can offer health care today. One of these was as follows:

*"You used to be much more 'muchier'. You've lost your muchness," said the Mad Hatter (to Alice).*

Walsh and Craig (2014) define muchness as:

*"Who we have become through our life journey... It's what we stand for and how we offer our own self into the community we live in. It is about all the learning we have done in our whole lives, the ups and the downs, not just our work lives. It's about what we choose to pay attention to and our effort to."*

A dictionary definition states that muchness means:

*"the quality or state of being in great quantity, extent, or degree" (Merriam Webster, n.d.)*

When reflecting on my experiences and these definitions, I propose that some nursing staff have "lost their muchness," potentially impacting on their ability to practise human caring in the ways that they want to. Initial explorations of muchness, to make explicit any assumptions that I might be taking into the research, situate it primarily in the eudaimonic tradition of well-being. In this context, muchness is associated with "living well," in accordance with an individual's values and beliefs and embodied moral virtues; and having a sense of purpose and fulfilment. This understanding draws on not only the work of contemporary philosophers such as Norton (1976) and May (1969) (cited in Waterman, 2008), but also the work of psychologists such as Waterman (2008) and Huta (2013), who recognize the subjective experiences of eudaimonic well-being. This exploration made me question whether current organizational approaches to the promotion of well-being (Department of Health, 2011a, 2011b) enable the development of cultures where both staff and patients experience person-centredness, enabling them to thrive and flourish. Person-centredness is defined by McCormack, Manley, and Titchen (2013, p. 193) as:

*...an approach to practice established through the formation and fostering of healthful relationships between all care providers, service users and others significant to them in their lives. It is underpinned by values of respect for persons, individual right to self-determination, mutual respect and understanding. It is enabled by cultures of empowerment that foster continuous approaches to practice development.*

My research therefore aims to explore the following questions: What is muchness? How can muchness be nurtured? And how does

muchness contribute to person-centred cultures, specifically human flourishing?

The starting point for the research was a review of the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of well-being. A vast amount of time and many cultural shifts have occurred since Aristotle wrote *Nicomachean Ethics*. As a result, this is a massive field of knowledge with multiple interpretations and discipline-based approaches; some are complementary, and others are conflictual. With this in mind, my intention was to navigate a way through to identify the literature that was relevant to my research. Through this process, I was able to determine that muchness is situated within the eudaimonic tradition of well-being. Whilst the traditional translation of “eudaimonia” is happiness, some modern-day philosophers prefer to translate it as “flourishing” (Huta & Waterman, 2014, p. 1,427). The concept of eudaimonia originally arises from the contemplations of Aristotle, focusing around the questions of how we should live and what constitutes a life well-lived. As such, it was seen as objective condition (Waterman, 2008), judged from the outside. However, in accordance with the views of more contemporary philosophers, who acknowledge subjective experiences (Norton, 1976; May, 1969, cited in Waterman, 2008), I believe that muchness is more closely related to the subjective experience of well-being. Subsequently, I have worked virtually, creatively, and critically with nurses to capture “stories of muchness.” We have used the process of exploration and the creation of these stories to help us to understand the concept itself and how it can best be nurtured in the workplace.

### 3 | PAULO FREIRE: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

I was originally drawn to the work of Paulo Freire in the very early days of my doctoral studies, when I was considering what my research methodology and methods might look like. I was imagining enabling nurses to engage in self-reflective inquiry about their subjective experiences of muchness, to facilitate a process that would enable the construction of new knowledge about muchness, raising consciousness of the practices and situations that enabled nurses to experience it (and those that prevented it), with the purpose of identifying ways in which it could be experienced more often. This could involve not only challenging personal constraints, e.g. the belief that you are powerless to change anything, but also confronting barriers within the workplace and organizational culture and context that ultimately prevent nurses from working in ways that enable them to experience muchness, and ultimately to flourish. Through my exploration of the “family of approaches” related to action research (Cordeiro, Baldini Soares, & Rittenmeyer, 2017, p.3) and methods such as photovoice (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Hergenrather, Rhodes, & Bardhoshi, 2009), I was intuitively drawn to Freire’s idea of conscientization. This is a process through which people (individually and collectively) are empowered by constructing and using their own knowledge of reality,

thereby identifying how it can be transformed (Reason & Torbert, 2001; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008).

Paulo Freire was a philosopher, educator and political activist. He was born in 1921 in one of the poorest regions of Brazil. From a very early age, he became concerned about the impact of poverty, struggling to understand the silence of the working classes that condemned them to passivity under the oppression of a dominant minority (Ledwith, 2016). Similarly, his interest in education appears to have started at an early age (Taylor, 1993) and focused on helping adults who were illiterate to read and write, using a method that drew on the social and political realities of the students. Because this approach had the potential for political outcomes, he was scapegoated in the early 1960s, accused of “bringing the country to the verge of revolution” (Taylor, 1993, p. 25) by politicizing the masses and threatening the status quo. He was therefore arrested and later exiled to Chile.

In addition to his experiences of working with working-class communities, Freire’s thinking and therefore his pedagogy were influenced by his wide reading, an eclectic mix of pedagogies and philosophies, creating a “complex tissue” of woven threads (Taylor, 1993, p. 34). Different authors identify different influences in his work. For example, Ledwith (2016, p. 30) suggests influences of philosophers and theorists such as Marx, “Satre, Marcuse, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Merleau-Ponty, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, and African thinkers Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon and Julius Nyerere.” Torres (1994 p. 431), however, recognizes influences from “phenomenology, existentialism, Christian personalism, humanist Marxism, and Hegelianism.” Ultimately, Torres (1994) argued that Freire’s synthesis of these philosophical perspectives, leading to the development of his political philosophy of education, demanded “dialogue and ultimately social awareness as a way to overcome domination and oppression among and between human beings” (p. 431).

It was during his time in prison and the years that followed in exile in Chile, where he continued to be involved in powerful working-class organizations, that Freire’s ideas about the political nature of education began to crystallize. Central to this philosophy is the intertwined nature of education and freedom, where education is seen as the means by which people can be freed from the constraints of cultural silence (Taylor, 1993, p.1 citing Reimer, 1970, p. 69). Fundamental to Freire’s theory is the idea that human beings become dehumanized when their consciousness is submerged by an oppressive reality. Those absorbed by this reality will remain oppressed, accepting their circumstances as inevitable, as long as they are unaware of the causes of their oppression. The theory recognizes that both learners and teachers should be seen as “subjects” involved in the wakening of a critical consciousness of reality. Freire’s critical pedagogy emerged as a collective and empowering process of learning that enables people to:

- Step back from and to question those aspects of everyday life that are so familiar that they become taken for granted, helping us to see the world in a new way

- Identify the structures within society that act to disempower, discriminate and disadvantage some people, becoming critical of the knowledge that serves the interests of the dominant few yet is “sold to society as common sense” (Ledwith, 2016, p. 35)
- Develop new knowledge and create new theories that will help them to identify what they would like to change and the actions they will take to achieve this.

Freire's work is not without its critics. Some of its shortcomings Freire (1994) himself acknowledged. Indeed, Bell Hooks (1993, p. 152) praises Freire for his “generous spirit” and “open-mindedness” in the face of criticism, much of which is addressed in his later writing or dialogues.

It is contended that some criticisms can be attributed to poor scholarship and consequently educators who “domesticate” Freire's overall theory and intent (Glass, 2001; McLaren & Leonard, 1993), using it instead as a method (Au, 2009) in a spontaneous and uncritical way. Similarly, Au (2009) suggests that the difficulties that some educators have had in using Freire's work in different contexts are probably due to the existence of fundamental differences in epistemological stances, e.g. whether the material world is something that can be known and understood, leading to failed attempts to apply the theory.

Criticisms include the following:

- The type of language used (Ohliger, 1995), which has been described as “pompous, inaccessible, elitist and portentous” (Hendricks, n.d., p. 3); and also discriminatory as highlighted by Au (2009) who comments on the universal use of the term “man”
- That his work is too simplistic, in the sense that his focus on class struggle excluded other forms of oppression, such as those associated with gender and race, although Au (2009) argues that Freire believed that discussion and theorizing could apply across different contexts and all forms of oppression as represented by my research with nurses, based on an assumption that nurses are considered to be oppressed due to both sex and class (Whitehead, 2010). Hendricks (n.d., p. 3) also contests that critics such as Diane Coben suggest that Freire's focus on class fails to recognize the “multifaceted and contradictory nature of differential power relationships.” By using a dualistic role definition, the oppressed and the oppressor, Hendricks (n.d.) argues that there is a danger that the complexity of power and domination within simultaneous and interconnected identities might be overlooked. For example, a female director of nursing may be perceived by nurses to be in a position of power, but suffer oppression in the face of an all-male Trust board, which impacts on the ways in which she feels able to work. The bipolar nature of Freire's theory is also criticised by Taylor (1993, p. 54), questioning why Freire seems to ignore the “central canopy of life where most people live”: lack of clarity, flawed theorizing and truth assumptions (Galloway, 2012; Glass, 2001; Taylor, 1993); and unclear ontology and epistemology as highlighted in debates such as Mackie (1988). It could be argued that the lack of clarity is not surprising, bearing in mind the eclectic mix of philosophies and theories that Freire draws upon.

**TABLE 1** Original theoretical principles arising from Freire's work

Humanization as an ontological vocation
The world and mind in a constant state of becoming
Reality can be known, but not in a singular way
Knowledge of reality facilitates transformation of reality
Praxis as a dialectal dance (reflection and action; subject and object; subject to subject)

Yet despite these criticisms, Freire's work continues to be debated and his ideas used to inform liberatory education and community development across the world. Whilst I accept the criticisms outlined above, and recognize that these create limitations in Freire's thinking, I still believe that they are sufficiently coherent and robust to inform my research.

By engaging in a detailed study of Freire's key concepts: *conscientization* and *critical consciousness*; *praxis*—a *dialogical* process of *reflection* and *action*; and *power* and *knowledge*, I was able to identify a number of theoretical perspectives that I thought would underpin my research (see Table 1).

## 4 | EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS AND PERSONS

Key to undertaking research that is person-centred is the ability to articulate a clear philosophical position relating to the question: “What is a person?” My opening stance seemed simple enough; I believe that all human beings are persons. This is because I believe that all human beings/persons are of equal value and therefore should be treated with equal respect. However, it was at this point that I recognized that whilst the terms “human beings” and “persons” might be used interchangeably, philosophically there are many differing perspectives. I began to question whether Freire's use of the term “human being” (Freire, 2000) related to my understanding of what a person is. To answer this question, I had to explore my own ontology and then to compare this in the light of Freire's philosophical ideas as I currently appreciated them. The process of trying to make sense of and articulate my understanding of persons and personhood, and compare that with Freire's perspective on humanity was not a simple one. This is perhaps not surprising as the philosophical debates on humanness and personhood have a very long history, going back as far as Socrates in the 4th century BC (Torchia, 2008). These debates continue today with many differences of opinion: differences that are acknowledged by Trigg (cited in Torchia, 2008, p. 1) who highlights some of the opposing viewpoints, from considering human beings as one of many animal species influenced by evolutionary history at one extreme to persons who are the “special creation” of God at the other.

It is not the intention of this article to provide a complete summary on this literature. Instead, it will demonstrate how the process of reading, rereading and writing enabled me to clarify my

values, beliefs and assumptions about what a person is, so that I could critique Freire's thinking in relation to human nature, and ultimately reflect on my original theoretical principles, to identify and attend to any perceived gaps or inadequacies. Through the reading and writing process, three headings emerged, which helped me to frame and articulate my understandings: *Our species: human beings*; *The kind that we are: human nature*; and *This person that I am: personhood*.

## 5 | OUR SPECIES: HUMAN BEINGS

It was through consideration of human beings as a species in the natural world that I became aware of my belief that we are embodied beings. Scruton (2013, 2017) argues that we are animals, we have a biology and we are part of the natural world like other animals and plants. As such, the physical body is governed by natural laws that can be studied through physiological investigation and explained in causal terms. Whilst I believe that this is true, I recognize that there is a danger in just thinking about human beings in terms of the physical and material nature of our bodies, potentially as objects. In the view of Johnson (2008), such a perspective could lead to the perception that the physical body is a container for the mind, rather than a phenomenal body in which the mind is thoroughly embodied.

In agreement with Scruton (2013), I believe that biological science does not give us the whole truth about human nature because we live in the world in a different way to all other animals. I found that I was intuitively drawn to the work of Mark Johnson (2007), which is underpinned by John Dewey's principle of continuity (1938/1991 cited in Johnson, 2008, p. 10) and draws on phenomenology and cognitive sciences, to seek an understanding of how humans, as biological beings, develop meaning through embodied engagement with their environments. Accordingly, in keeping with Johnson (2007), I would argue that the difference between human beings and animals is a consequence of the development of "higher" cognitive processes that enable us to explore, critique and transform our experiences (Johnson, 2007). This development is a result of natural or evolutionary processes, rather than the work of an "outside force" (Dewey 1938/1991, p. 30 cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 10).

## 6 | THE KIND THAT WE ARE: HUMAN NATURE

As already suggested, in agreement with Torchia (2008), Scruton (2017) and indeed Freire (2000), recognizing our "human nature" is accepting that there is something distinct about our humanness. But I also acknowledge that this distinctiveness can in some cases be blurred, something that I would now attribute to the principle of continuity. For example, there are many similarities between the nurturing behaviours of humans and apes. However, my concern within the context of my research is not whether nonhumans should be considered to be persons, but that all humans are considered

persons. I therefore decided that I did not need to consider the moral or ethical debates that are associated with discussions about hierarchies of attributes (e.g. McCormack & McCance, 2010). Instead, I decided to explore the idea of "human nature," thinking instead about the ways in which we, as human beings, live in the world. This meant looking beyond just the biological, to discover all the things that we share (potential or actual) as part of our human nature, e.g. social, emotional, rational, moral, historical and cultural. To achieve this, I returned to Freire (2000), to reflect on how he defined human nature—the kind that we are and the things that we share, which led me to consider an alternative perspective.

According to Harris (2011), there is very limited literature on Freire's philosophy of human nature. I therefore reread *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), searching for text that provided insight into his perspective. Having identified what I perceived to be significant text, I created a summary to capture his key ideas and the meanings that I draw from them (see Box 1).

Reflecting on Freire's perspective on human nature proved significant. This was because it forced me to reflect on my ontological beliefs as I experienced discomfort as I faced the recognition of Freire's apparent belief in cognitive rationality. I consequently had to consider how this perspective fitted (or not) with my research questions and the understanding that I was developing about muchness as a subjective experience. What follows is an overview of my understanding of dualism in the light of Freire's view of human nature, which led me to consider our understanding of being in the world.

### 6.1 | The primacy of the mind

Reflecting on the summary in Box 1, I believe that Freire's perspective of human nature was that ontologically and epistemologically, human beings engage with and understand the world primarily in a cognitive way. This is because he emphasizes the importance of rationality, consciousness, reflection and the use of language, etc. No overt attention is paid to the body and how it might contribute to experience and meaning. It could be argued that this should not be surprising, as the emphasis of rational discourse is something that has been attributed to the male-dominated critical social theorists.

This view resonates with a dualist or Cartesian worldview. Dualism can be traced back as far as Plato (Torchia, 2008), placing primacy on the mind over the body. The body in everyday life is taken for granted, seen as a "house" (Barbour, 2004, p. 226) or even a "betrayal or prison" (Grosz, 1994, p. 5 cited in McDonald & McIntyre, 2001, p. 236) for the soul (if you believe we have one), mind and person. This separation was further theorized by Descartes, who famously states: "I think therefore I am" (Descartes, 1968, p. 53, cited in Barbour, 2004, p. 228). In essence, Torchia (2008) suggests that in this view, what is essentially human is confined to the mind, with any claim to individuality or personhood also being rooted here.

The primacy of the mind, based on Cartesian philosophy, has underpinned Westernized values for many years. Typically, this masculinized perspective views men as those who are capable of using rational

### Box 1 A summary of Freire's philosophy on human nature

When offering an overview of Freire's perspective of being human beings, Crotty (1998, p. 150) suggests that "to ask who human beings are or what it means to be human is to ask what human beings have made of themselves." I understand this to mean that human beings are therefore "**beings for themselves**," uncompleted and unfinished, in a process of becoming more fully human.

Freire argues that we can engage in this process because we are **conscious beings who live in relation to the world and others**. Freire argues that human beings cannot exist without a "non-I," and similarly, the "non-I" is dependent upon the existence of the other. Without human beings, Freire suggests that the world would not exist because there would be no one to call it the world, to be conscious of it and to construct what we know as reality. Here, Freire is acknowledging the importance of the "**word**." **Dialogue** is indispensable to the cognitive act of unveiling reality, as Freire believed that it was essential to name the world to be able to change it. Consciousness is therefore brought into existence through our relationship with the world. This is not something that we do alone as we are social beings. Consequently, we also live in relationship with others. I make sense of Freire's view on the existence of the world by drawing on Humphreys (1993, p. 17, cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 43), who describes the world in the absence of human beings as being full of "worldstuff"; such worldstuff exists but not as meaningful realities.

**Freedom** is also a necessary condition for humans to continuously strive towards completion. My understanding of Freire's use of the term freedom is that it is the ability to make your own decisions, to create and transform ourselves and reality; not only materially but also in terms of who we are and how we live. However, Freire also acknowledges that freedom can also be associated with fear (for both the oppressed and oppressors), as the authentic existence that is connected with freedom comes not only with **autonomy** but also with **responsibility**.

Freire argues that human beings are able to strive towards completion because they can **critically confront self and reality**. They can perceive the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves, critically reflecting on the dialectical relationship between themselves as subjective beings and their concrete historical and cultural reality.

Freire believes that **praxis (reflection and action)** is an innate ability that enables human beings to **transcend** beyond situations that may limit them from being more fully human. By objectifying the world in order to understand it, human beings are then able to make decisions, in relationship with the world and others, **transforming** it through their actions. In this way, an individual is a re-creator of self and the world: both of which are incomplete and both of which are historical. My reading of this is that Freire believes that we have a **creative** nature because not only are we able to critically reflect on situations, we are also able to imagine how things could be different. Whilst praxis might be an innate ability, it is something that can be suppressed (by oppressive practices) but also facilitated (by liberatory educators).

Freire suggests that **fulfilment** is achieved, only to the extent that human beings are able to create their world—a world that is a human world. This acknowledges his belief that human beings are not meant to adapt, but to shape the very conditions of their existence.

My understanding of becoming more fully human being is that in praxis, human beings are able to reflect and act on those situations that limit them from transforming reality and creating their own history and culture. This is a continuous process.

(impartial, detached and objective) methods to determine truth and reality, and therefore as the legitimate holders of knowledge (Barbour, 2004). In this view, Bordo (1987, cited in Benner, 2000) argues that thinking is completely detached from emotion, imagination or embodiment. Similarly, Barbour (2004) posits that in this worldview, experience is not considered to be a valid form of knowledge from which to establish truth. Instead, the knower (subject) and the known (object) are radically separated (Benner, 2000), enabling the knower to create internal mental representations that are conscious, and can be articulated as statements of "truth" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, cited in Benner, 2000).

This latter process resonates with Harris's (2011) belief that Freire's perspective on human nature was largely influenced by Erich Kahler's idea of discernment; i.e. that human beings (unlike animals) have the ability to separate from and to objectify the world. Hence, they are able to identify the ways in which they can transcend limiting conditions towards achieving their ontological vocation of humanizing the world.

However, it must be acknowledged that Freire did not believe that there were single truths as he recognized that social reality is constantly changing (Taylor, 1993) and our interpretations of it will be influenced by our values, needs, interests and agendas (Mackie, 1988; Powers, 2015). Freire (2000) also appreciated the importance of experiences, or existential situations, suggesting that these should be represented through visual, graphic, tactile or auditory means (codifications), albeit as "cognizable objects" to stimulate critical reflection, i.e. thoughts and actions. However, it seems likely that he believed that these situations were experienced primarily through the mind, rather than the body.

## 6.2 | Embodiment: the body and mind are entwined

An alternative philosophical perspective to dualism and cognitive rationality has been offered by Merleau-Ponty, who was strongly



influenced by the work of both Husserl and Heidegger. This alternative viewpoint has acquired growing interest and support, particularly over the last four decades (Johnson, 2008). Contrary to mind and body dualism, Merleau-Ponty suggested the notion of the “body-subject,” which does not privilege the mind and cognitive activity (Ray, 2006). Instead, he asserts that we live and experience the world through our bodies, particularly through perception, emotion, language, movement in space and time, and sexuality (Ray, 2006). From this perspective, Benner (2000) argues that the phenomenal body is the only means of being in the world. The mind and body are entwined, and the mind is always embodied (Barbour, 2004). Embodiment is the existential condition of being in the world (McDonald & McIntyre, 2001) and receiving and generating knowledge about the world (Grosz, 1994, cited in McDonald & McIntyre, 2001). Consciousness is therefore embodied consciousness (Benner, 2000), and the mind is an embodied mind (Johnson, 2007).

I have found Johnson's (2007, 2008) work of particular interest when thinking about human nature and relating this to nurses and how they might experience muchness in and through their practice. His theory is underpinned by the philosophical ideas of the American pragmatists, primarily not only John Dewey, but also William James. Additionally, he draws on his own work on metaphors undertaken with George Lakoff (1980, 1999), the work of phenomenologists (e.g. Sheets-Johnstone, 1999), and also cognitive neuroscientists (e.g. Damasio, 1994; 1999; 2003), to provide naturalistic explanations for the ways in which meaning emerges from our bodily engagement with the world. Meaning, for Johnson (2007, p. 10), is concerned with “the character and significance of a person's interactions with their environments,” which I assume also includes others within these environments. This seems of particular relevance to my research as I explore the nature of muchness and how it can be nurtured through experiences in the workplace.

My understanding of Johnson's theory of embodiment is that human beings have a brain operating inside their bodies, and this body is engaged in a continual process of interaction with its environment. This continuity means that there is no duality between mind and body, or body and environment. It also results in a continuous flow of experience. Human meaning is relational and as our bodies are in constant interaction with our world; consequently, meaning-making is ongoing. Much of this is an unconscious process, undertaken by complex and intertwined sensorimotor systems that protect our basic bodily functions, safeguard us from harm and also guide us towards a sense of well-being. Johnson describes this form of meaning as “*immanent*.” Within this continuous flow of experience and meaning-making, Damasio (1994; 1999; 2003; cited in Johnson, 2007) suggests that there are situations that require transformative actions to maintain or re-establish equilibrium. These will come to conscious awareness as emotions (complex neural, chemical and behavioural responses) become acknowledged as feelings. These are feelings of “qualities, sensory patterns, movements, changes and emotional contours.” “*Conscious*” meaning therefore “depends upon

us experiencing and assessing the quality of situations” (Johnson, 2007, p. 70).

Drawing on Dewey, Johnson (2007) argues that in its deepest and richest sense, experience is a complexity of physical, biological, social and cultural conditions. Within this complexity, we discriminate certain qualities for further analysis. For example, we could become conscious of feeling that a situation is problematic (e.g. a lack of muchness or well-being at work) and recognize that it requires further interpretation and explanation. It is through this analysis process that objects, properties and relations emerge as we search for generalizations that can help with our understanding. This process of conceptualization is attributed to our neural capacity to discriminate various qualities, but unlike a dualist perspective, these objects are not fixed entities. Instead, they emerge from our bodily perceptual experience. As such, there is no ontological separation between emotion, feeling, perception, conceptualization, reason and action etc.

I make sense of Johnson's perspective on the mind such that it is the bodily activity that enables us to engage in this higher form of inquiry about our experiences, allowing us to conceptualize, reflect, reason and action plan. There are no identified brain or body parts that can be identified as the “mind”; instead, the mind is the processes that evolve out of our “ongoing coupling with our environment” (Johnson, 2007, p. 130); processes that Damasio (1994, p. xvi, cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 99) would argue are neural. This is underpinned by the pragmatist assumption that all that we associate with the mind arises from this ongoing coupling, and from the immanent meaning that we develop, as we seek “to survive, grow and flourish with in different kinds of environment” (Johnson, 2007, p.130).

So far, the focus has been on an individual human being and their engagement with their world; however, Johnson (2007) is clear that a large part of this interaction involves other human beings and that our thinking, reasoning, language and understanding are social. Our cognition is significantly influenced by our social interactions and relations, as well as cultural artefacts and practices; similarly, language and all other forms of symbolic expression are viewed as social behaviours. Johnson (2008, p. 164–166) suggests that there are at least five entwined dimensions of human embodiment: the biological body; the ecological body; the phenomenological body; the social body; and the cultural body. In this sense, Johnson (2007) argues that the mind, i.e. perception, feeling, emotion, reasoning and acting, is interfused with our embodiment, shaping what and who we are.

## 7 | CREATING MORE COMPLETE THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES

At this stage, it was important to reflect on Freire's (2000) perspective on human nature, in the light of Johnson's (2007, 2008) viewpoint as outlined above, to identify any perceived inadequacies or inconsistencies between Freire's theoretical ideas, the theoretical principles that I have drawn from these, and my ontological beliefs and assumptions.

Original principle	Amended principle
Humanization as an ontological vocation	
The world and mind in a constant state of becoming	The body-mind and world in a constant state of becoming
Reality can be known but not in a singular way	
Knowledge of reality facilitates transformation of reality	Experience-based and embodied knowledge of reality facilitates transformation of reality
Praxis as a dialectical dance (reflection and action, subject and object, subject and subject)	Praxis as a dialectical dance (reflection and action, body-mind and environment, subject and subject)

**TABLE 2** Amended theoretical principles

## 7.1 | The world and mind in a constant state of becoming

Both theories suggest that human beings are deeply connected to and continuously interacting with the world/environment. Similarly, both agree that to survive, become or flourish, adjustments or transformations in the way we relate to our world and others need to be made. I believe the difference between them lies in the nature of this interaction. Freire proposes that this is primarily a cognitive relationship; whilst Johnson argues that it is an embodied relationship, the "body-mind" interacting with the environment.

This difference therefore draws attention to Freire's process of conscientization and the state of critical consciousness. Conscientization, Freire (2000) argues, relies on our apparent ability to step back from this interaction, and critically confront ourselves and reality (discernment). In contrast, Door (2014) argues that both Merleau-Ponty and Dewey contend that humans are in fact unable to separate themselves from the world because: "The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside of myself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 407, cited in Door, 2014, p. 92). Reality is therefore not something that is just "out there," full of external concrete objects that can be mentally represented. Instead, we come to know reality through our immanent and conscious meaning-making processes. We will discriminate objects, properties and relations, using our perceptual and motor abilities, guided by our interests, history and values (Johnson, 2007).

## 7.2 | Knowledge of reality facilitates transformation of reality

Conscientization towards developing a state of critical consciousness, i.e. an awareness of the factors that contribute to oppression, will therefore involve paying attention to the body as an important source of knowledge. This will involve critical reflexivity to develop a deeper understanding of our preconscious, embodied transactions, and how these might help or impede the humanization of self and others (Door, 2014), as well as critiquing the socio-cultural world to determine the impositions that it makes on us (Johnson, 2015).

## 7.3 | Praxis as a dialectical dance

Freire (2000) asserts that conscientization and ultimately critical consciousness are achieved through the dialogical process of praxis. Being able to name the world, i.e. the "word," is essential to what Freire believes to be the cognitive act of unveiling reality so that it can be transformed by self and others through our/their actions. Whilst Johnson (2007) would not dispute the value of language as a means of sharing and discussing our thoughts and arguments about the nature of reality, he draws attention to the primacy of body-based and intersubjective meaning, which he argues emerges from the body-mind interaction with the environment and others, leading to thought and then word/language. This challenges the dualist perspective that would contest that in the first instance, meaning belongs to words.

In many ways, Dewey's definition of human inquiry, as outlined by Johnson (2007, p. 105), resonates with Freire's notion of praxis. He states that human inquiry is "an embodied, situated, ongoing process that begins with a problematic or indeterminate situation, employs intelligence and symbolic resources of thought to clarify and seek to resolve the tension in the situation, and, when successful, transforms the character and quality of the situation." What is missing from praxis is the recognition of embodiment. It seems that the body has been ignored or is invisible and experience feels like it is a story to be told rather than a sophisticated abstraction and conceptualization of our embodiment. Conversely, I would argue what is missing from Dewey's definition of human inquiry is dialogue.

In the light of the above discussion, I revisited and amended some of my theoretical principles. These are outlined in Table 2 below.

## 8 | THIS PERSON THAT I AM: PERSONHOOD

At the beginning of the article, I identified the need to explore the relationship between Freire's use of the term "human being" and my understanding of what is a person, and it is this that I now turn my attention to. This is not an issue that either Freire (2000) or Johnson



(2007) paid explicit attention to; instead, they seemed to use the two terms (human being and person) interchangeably.

Through my encounter with and exploration of the vast literature and debates surrounding the question of “what does it mean to be a person?,” I was able to further develop my ontological understanding and critique Freire’s perspectives, in a way that enabled me to finalize the theoretical principles that would ultimately inform the development of my methodology and methods with the ultimate purpose of helping me to explore my research questions.

8.1 | What does it mean to be a person?

I believe that a person is a biological being, part of the natural world like other animals and plants; an individual member of the human species. We are embodied beings, constantly interacting and engaging with our environment and other embodied beings (Johnson, 2007). Our bodies are separate from one another, and therefore, we experience the world in a unique way, as individual subjects. This unique experience of “being in the world” ultimately influences who we are (McCormack & McCance, 2010; Medlock, 2012). A key element of this is our relational existence. Our embodied engagement with the social world means that our being as persons continually evolves (McCormack & McCance, 2010), as we open ourselves up to the perspective of others through ongoing social interactions (Medlock, 2012). This means therefore that we are always becoming, never finished and always incomplete in some way (Freire, 2000). It is through this process Cassell (1982, cited in Dewing, 2008) would argue that human beings are able to develop a full sense of being a person. It is this sense that I understand the meaning of personhood. McCormack and McCance (2017) cite Liebing (2008, p. 180) when defining personhood, stating that it is “that which really matters” to us that guides us. This really resonates with Medlock’s (2012) ideas about the “authentic self,” recognizing the importance of one’s value orientation and the possibility of pursuing a life path that is consistent with these.

Dewing (2008, p. 5) quotes the poet W. H. Auden (which was originally cited in van Manen, 1997, p. 6), to suggest that when we refer to “persons,” we are referring “to the uniqueness of each human being.” I am drawn to the way in which this uniqueness is captured over the lifespan by Selder (1989, cited in McCormack & McCance, 2010) as “the tapestry of one’s life.” McCormack and McCance (2010, p. 14) summarize this as:

*A person’s reality refers to the everyday world. It is imbued with personal meanings, beliefs and values which are essential to the way the persons ‘sees’ themselves and the way the world is constructed. Whilst many aspects of an individual’s reality may be shared with others so that common understandings can exist in order to form a sense of community, it is the individuality of personal*

TABLE 3 Final theoretical principles

Humanization as an ontological vocation
The body–mind and world in a constant state of becoming personhood
Person-centredness
Reality can be known but not in a singular way
Experience-based and embodied knowledge of reality facilitates transformation of reality
Praxis as a dialectical dance (reflection and action, body–mind and environment, subject and subject)

*meanings that determines ‘who I am’. It is the rich tapestry of meaning that creates the foundation on which the structures of one’s life are built.*

It is this uniqueness and individuality that I believe is missing from Freire’s (2000) theory, when thinking about my research. In line with other critical social theorists, he focuses on the collective, specifically the “oppressed” (and the “oppressors”), i.e. social groups that he regards as homogenous types. Whilst my research aims to develop some common understandings that hopefully can be shared, I believe that person-centred research must always also acknowledge the rich and unique tapestries of the participants and co-researchers.

Such a definition of a person does not put any conditions on which members of the human species are considered to be persons. This fits with my opening stance; all human beings are persons. Associated with this, I align myself with the Kantian belief, or categorical imperative, that all persons have intrinsic worth and dignity, and should always be treated as an end in themselves (McCormack et al., 2017; McCormack & McCance, 2010). This view I argue resonates with Freire’s (2000) theory, as his underlying assumption was that it is every human being’s ontological vocation to be a “subject,” or a person, who is able to continuously act upon their world, to become. To realize this, we need to call upon the intrinsic moral good of persons, as a means of making ethical decisions about what is “right” or “good” in a certain situation (Medlock, 2012). Freire (2000) argues that freedom is a necessary condition for humans to continuously strive towards completion; however, this autonomy to make decisions also comes with responsibility. This includes having and acting upon an ethical value orientation towards what it means to be a good person and live a good life (MacIntyre, 1984; Taylor, 1989).

Having asserted that all human beings are persons, that persons are unique individuals, who should be considered intrinsically valuable, I conclude that person-centredness is therefore not only the recognition of this uniqueness but also the promotion of autonomy, responsibility and dignity, through the development and nurturing of healthful relationships (McCormack et al., 2017) and manifest within culture. It is underpinned by the values of respect, reciprocity, mutuality and self-determination (McCormack & McCance, 2010). Person-centredness was therefore added to complete my theoretical principles (see Table 3).

## 9 | CONCLUSION

This article presents a critique of Paulo Freire's philosophical perspective on human nature in the context of a doctoral research study to explore "muchness" or nurses' subjective experience of well-being. This process of exploration was essential to ensure that I gained clarity about my ontological beliefs relating to the nature of human beings and persons. This ensured that there was coherence with the theoretical principles that I drew from Freire's (2000) work.

Through this critique, I recognized that Freire's perspective on human nature foregrounded cognitive rationality, which presented itself as a limitation when considering my ontological beliefs and the focus of my research; and focused on the "collective" rather than individuals, which is a shortcoming in relation to person-centred research that acknowledges the uniqueness of participants. Acknowledging these limitations enabled me to draw upon wider philosophical perspectives around embodiment and person-centredness to develop more complete theoretical principles to underpin the development of my research methodology and methods. These will inform the ways in which I work with nurses, as participants and co-researchers, to explore the concept of muchness in nursing; the factors that enable their subjective experiences of well-being; and how muchness contributes to the development of person-centred cultures.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

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